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POETRY FOR CREATIVE DEFINITIONS.

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ONE OF THE USES FOR POETRY IN THE CLASSROOM IS THAT OF STUDYING THE WAY A POET EMPLOYS FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND THE CONCRETE, SENSUAL IMAGE TO BRING INTO SHARP FOCUS, OR SUGGEST BY CONNOTATION, THE DEFINITION OF A SINGLE WORD. THIS, IN TURN, CAN LEAD TO STUDENT EXERCISES IN DEFINING WORDS IN CONCRETE SENSUAL LANGUAGE. BY TAKING A POEM WHICH SEEMS TO GIVE EMPHASIS TO ONE WORD ("LOVELINESS" IN SARA TEASDALE'S "BARTER," FOR INSTANCE) AND ASKING STUDENTS TO DESCRIBE WHAT THE POET MEANT BY THE WORD, WHAT THEY MEAN BY THE WORD, AND WHAT SOME LITERARY CHARACTER THEY HAVE STUDIED MIGHT MEAN, THE FULL RANGE OF LANGUAGE ARTS EXPERIENCES ARE BROUGHT INTO PLAY. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 56 (SEPTEMBER 1967), 845-847.) (DL)

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Poetry for Creative Definitions

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ONE OF the most delightful and provocative aspects of fine poetry is often merely a single word which the poet struggles to redefine for us. Often at the heart of a poetic experience throbs this one word whose meaning at the end of the poem shimmers in a new and original light, a light fed by the energy of the poem and the interaction of its unique ideas and images. Our own understanding of the meaning of the word must, if the poem is a good one, come into clearer focus. In the classroom, we can capitalize upon the poet's refinement of basic definitions to bring our pupils not only a sharper picture of the poet's craft, but a heightened sense of the multidimensional features of a word. If a student can express clearly the way in which he thinks a poet has defined an essential word in the poem; if he can visualize his own meaning of the word and put it down in concrete sensory language; if he can write a definition for the word as if he were some great literary character whom he has studied: then our pupil has built a truly creative definition, one actually molded by the pupil's own reactions to life and literature. As he defines the word—narrowed in each instance by some direction which we have imposed—the student calls into play a full range of language arts experiences: he is understanding an essence of poetry; he is relating a vital concept according to his own personality and testing the value of his definition by comparison; he is illustrating his comprehension of the mind of a great literary personality by speaking out the thoughts he feels some special character may have had.

Although this creative definition may grow from any one of a number of dynamic poems, I have selected poems by Sara Teasdale, Langston Hughes, and Carl Sandburg as illustrations here.

After we read "Barter" aloud, my class of high school juniors discussed the several implications of the "trade" established in the title and reinforced by words like *sell, buy*, and *count the cost.* Then, we focused our attention upon the word *loveliness.* How would the poet define it? Students quickly sensed Miss Teasdale's emotional kinship with the "beautiful and splendid" heart of nature. By selecting lines from the poem, each of the members of the class showed which of the poet's images of *loveliness* was especially significant to him. A wide range

of opinions brought us to consider other lovely things. Again, a flurry of individual "ecstacies" covered the room. When they were asked to account for such an astonishing difference in definitions, the students saw that the eye of the beholder really determines the real scope of a word. It followed naturally that the manner in which a person defined a word could reveal essential features of his personality. Keeping this in mind, the students then wrote one-sentence definitions of the word *loveliness* in the way they thought a number of literary figures would write them. Each of the characters presented to the group appeared in a work we had studied recently as a class unit.

Some of the definitions were metaphorical in their application of vivid sensory detail and concrete language. Others were profound in their expressions of a character's psychological and moral nature. The results showed in every instance an attempt by the student to crawl into the mind of a protagonist and read his thoughts; these definitions offered the students a vehicle to express their comprehension of an author's attempts at characterization. Below are several of the best which resulted from "Barter." The definitions are grouped according to the work in which the character appears:

Giants in the Earth

For Per Hansa, loveliness is a sunrise on an open plain and a rare smile of approval from his wife Beret.

—Charlene Rosenberg

For Per Hansa, loveliness is the contrast of the wilderness—brilliant with golden wheat—and the civilization he put there.

—Allen Blank

For Per Hansa, loveliness is independence, the feeling of self importance, the feel of hot sweat dripping from his body as he works his land.

—Larry Bush

For Beret, loveliness would be a home in Norway, a life near her parents and a marriage with their blessing.

—Betty Rieger

For Beret, loveliness is simplicity, the quiet natural flow of life that moves on at a steady pace with no sudden interruptions or fears of the future.

—Rosalie Wurm

"The Devil and Tom Walker"

For Tom Walker, loveliness is huge sums of shiny golden coins stacked neatly in long piles and the sorrowful look in a debtor's face.

—Ann Gross

For Tom Walker, loveliness is the jingle of glittering pieces of gold and the crisp crackle of newly minted bills.

—Lois Markland

AS A result of a discussion of "Dreams" by Hughes, my ninth-grade class, familiar with the techniques of metaphor, attempted to define *life* as each individual pupil viewed it. For Hughes, when there are no dreams, "Life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly" and "Life is a barren field frozen with snow." Students groped with individual reactions and experiences to create their metaphorical definitions:

Life is the questioning blue eyes of my infant cousin Richard opening for the first time in amazement to greet a changing world of birth and death.

—Beth Ross

Life is an elusive black fly buzzing through the air, slipping past the brown-eyed youngster who stalks him with a fly-swatter.

—Terry Sanders

Life is the rosebush growing in my garden, full of thorns, but fragrant and lovely.

—Alayne Finklestien

Life is my baby grand piano, at times low and melancholy, and at others high and gay, filled with springy tunes of joy.
—*Barbara Alderman*

From Sandburg's "Hope Is a Tattered Flag" we reap these creative definitions:

Hope is a brisk breeze dispersing one ominous charcoal thundercloud, the only imperfection marring the complete blueness of the sky.
—*Janet Hutter*

Hope is a blind beggar garbed in a tattered coat as he hears a coin tinkle in his rusted cup.
—*Rose Jachter*

Similarly, a class could be asked to read any of the following poems which attempt to refine our everyday conception of words. The students could then be asked to write definitions of the suggested word in the way they think the poet would define it, in the way they would define it, and in the way some literary figure would define it.

POEM	AUTHOR	WORD TO DEFINE
"I Saw a Man Pursuing the Horizon"	Crane	Horizon
"Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds"	Shakespeare	Love
"Love Walked Alone"	Crane	Love
"Love Is Not All"	Millay	Love
"Nature"	Longfellow	Nature
"in just spring"	cummings	Spring
"Death Be Not Proud"	Donne	Death
"We Are Seven"	Wordsworth	Death
"Lament"	Millay	Death
"Janet Waking"	Ransom	Death
"Thunder On! Stride On Democracy"	Whitman	Democracy
"In My Craft and Sullen Art"	Thomas	Art
"Primer Lesson"	Sandburg	Pride
"The Last Leaf"	Holmes	Age
"The Old Woman"	Campbell	Age
"I Died for Beauty"	Dickinson	Beauty
"Ode on a Grecian Urn"	Keats	Beauty
"Mending Wall"	Frost	Neighbors

This list, of course, represents my own preferences in teaching poems. Each teacher has his own storehouse of experiences with poetry he wishes to share with his students; and, it is within this realm of experience that the teacher can seek out *le seul mot* which will strike a vibrant chord in the imagination of his students. The "creative definition," alive in its potential for unique metaphorical expression, compels the student to pursue a course of original thinking and brings to him a better understanding of himself, of poetry, of words, and of the varied personalities of literary characters.